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ABSTRACT

Education for citizenship in a constitutional democracy has been a long-standing goal of schools in the United States. To achieve this goal, students must learn their civil rights and responsibilities in a free society. This ERIC Digest discusses: (1) the importance of teaching about the responsibilities of citizenship; (2) deficiencies in learning about responsible citizenship; (3) how to improve learning about responsible citizenship at home; (4) how to improve learning about responsible citizenship at school; and (5) where to obtain information and materials about how to teach responsible citizenship. (Author)

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John J. Patrick

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Teaching the Responsibilities of Citizenship

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Education for citizenship in a constitutional democracy has been a long-standing goal of schools in the United States. To achieve this goal, students must learn their civil rights and responsibilities in a free society. This ERIC Digest discusses (1) the importance of teaching about the responsibilities of citizenship, (2) deficiencies in learning about responsible citizenship, (3) how to improve learning about responsible citizenship at home, (4) how to improve learning about responsible citizenship at school, and (5) where to obtain information and materials about how to teach responsible citizenship.

Why Should We Teach the Responsibilities of Citizenship? Civil rights and liberties, claims based on law, are enforceable through the judicial system (e.g., the individual's right to freely express public policy preferences, to vote in a public election, or to have a trial by jury). By contrast, responsibilities of citizenship are obligations to contribute to the common good by performing duties to benefit the community (e.g., the individual's responsibility to become informed about public policies, to vote in public elections, or to serve willingly as a juror).

The preservation of civil rights and liberties is linked to performance of responsibilities. For example, the right of political participation means little when most citizens fail to exercise it. Furthermore, the right to free expression of political ideas is diminished when individuals do not gain knowledge about government. Responsibilities of citizenship—such as voluntary service to the community, participation in the political system, acquisition of knowledge about civic life, and public commitment to the values of constitutional democracy (e.g., liberty, justice, and the rule of law)—are essential to the health of a free society.

What Are the Deficiencies of Young Americans in Learning about Responsible Citizenship? Surveys of civic knowledge, attitudes, and actions reveal serious deficiencies in the citizenship education of young Americans. Reports on civic learning by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), for example, indicate that the majority of 12th graders have a rudimentary knowledge of government and citizenship in the United States. However, half of the students in grade 12 fail to demonstrate knowledge needed for responsible participation in the political system. Further, in 1988, only six percent of the high school seniors achieved the highest level of civic proficiency as defined in the NAEP test. A very disturbing finding was that high school students did "significantly less well" in civics in the most recent assessment (1988) than their 1982 counterparts (National Assessment of Educational Progress 1990, 13).

Surveys of attitudes show a weak orientation by adolescents toward voluntary service for the community (Hart 1988). Most students acknowledge the importance of voting and campaigning in public elections; but they also tend to express low levels of political interest and efficacy (Miller 1985). The percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds voting in public elections lags far behind the rate for those over age 25, which also tends to be much lower than desired by advocates of responsible citizenship.

There is a clear need to improve the learning of young Americans about their responsibilities as citizens of a democratic society. Parents and school teachers must act in concert to strengthen the desire and capacity of children for performance of civic obligations.

What Can Be Done at Home? Parents and guardians are the child's first and most influential teachers of civic values and attitudes. Lessons learned at home about political participation or community service, for example, are likely to set the terms and tone for later learning about these responsibilities of citizenship.

Parents and guardians can enhance the child's learning of citizenship responsibilities by doing the following things at home.

- Set a good example by participating in the political system and volunteering for community service projects.
- Show interest in civic affairs and government through initiation of conversations at dinner time or in response to television programs about current events.
- Require children to perform duties regularly at home as lessons in the value of contributing to the common good of their family unit.
- Encourage children to take part in community service projects, such as neighborhood clean-up or beautification activities, re-cycling of materials to conserve natural resources, and tutoring of younger children with learning problems.
- Provide civic learning resources in the home—books, magazines, newspapers—and use them with children.
- Transmit and reinforce the civic values of our constitutional democracy through discussions, exemplary behavior, and use of fair rules for orderly family life.
- Monitor and reinforce at home lessons in school about the responsibilities of citizenship.

What Can Be Done at School? After the family, the school has a major effect on the civic attitudes of children. It is the primary agency for teaching knowledge about politics and government. Examples are presented below about how to enhance education about citizenship responsibilities at school.

- Increase the amount of time that all students are involved in civic education at all levels of school.
- Infuse lessons about the responsibilities of citizenship into all subjects of the curriculum at all levels of schooling, with special emphasis in the social studies and literature courses.
- Require students to read, analyze, and discuss cases and stories about people involved in the civic life of their communities in the past and present.
- Establish cooperative learning experiences in which groups of students take responsibility for their own achievement of educational objectives.

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- Involve students in simulations and role playing activities about various aspects of civic responsibilities.
- Establish school-based programs for performance of community service as a regular part of the civics curriculum.
- Emphasize lessons about the civic values of our constitutional democracy at all levels of schooling through role modeling, reading and writing assignments, and open discussion of public issues and current events.
- Make assignments that require students to write letters to government officials or newspapers to advocate opinions about public issues and policies.
- Make assignments that require students to participate in political activities outside the classroom.

Where Can Information and Materials Be Obtained about How to Teach Responsible Citizenship? Information and materials on how to teach rights and responsibilities of citizenship can be obtained from the organizations or centers listed below.

- American Bar Association
  Special Committee on Youth Education for Citizenship
  541 N. Fairbanks Avenue
  Chicago, IL 60611-3314
  (312) 988-5735
- American Federation of Teachers
  Education for Democracy Project
  555 New Jersey Avenue, N.W.
  Washington, DC 20001
  (202) 879-4575
- Center for Civic Education
  5146 Douglas Fir Road
  Calabasas, CA 91302
  (818) 340-9320
- Close Up Foundation
  44 Canal Center Plaza
  Alexandria, VA 22314
  (703) 706-3300
- Constitutional Rights Foundation
  601 S. Kingsley Drive
  Los Angeles, CA 90005
  (213) 487-5590
- Council for the Advancement of Citizenship
  1200 Eighteenth Street, N.W.
  Suite 302
  Washington, DC 20036
  (202) 857-0580
- Educational Excellence Network
  1112 16th Street, N.W.
  Suite 500
  Washington, DC 20036
  (202) 785-2985
- National Council for the Social Studies
  3501 Newark Street, N.W.
  Washington, DC 20016
  (202) 966-7840
- Social Science Education Consortium
  3300 Mitchell Lane
  Boulder, CO 80301
  (303) 492-8154
- Social Studies Development Center
  Indiana University
  2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120
  Bloomington, IN 47408
  (812) 855-3838

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system. They are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are 703-440-1400 and 800-443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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